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ABSTRACT

Because students in remedial classes often become better readers without becoming better writers, a year-long experimental "change of focus" in a Title I remedial program attempted to close this gap by placing a greater emphasis on overcoming writing skill deficits than on overcoming reading skill deficits. To address teacher concerns while simultaneously stimulating student interest, a five-part letter in a private diary format and a six-step formula for answering questions in complete sentence form were used as the basis for instruction. The six steps involved the following: (1) reading the question, (2) crossing out the question word, (3) finding a good "starting word," (4) underlining some of the words from the question that could be used in the answer, (5) changing personal pronouns and other words that did not make sense, and (6) writing out the answer. These "no fail" strategies not only started the students writing, they provided a structure that kept them writing. Bad misspellings were unacceptable, but "good" misspellings were rewarded. Once students could construct clear, concise, literate topic sentences, the daily writing requirement was increased to include one development sentence built on the same pattern as the topic sentence. Three sentence paragraphs were reached by midyear. Carefully paired sentences designed to elicit comparison-contrast compositions were then used to stimulate "real," quality compositions. (JL)

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Have We Taught Them to Read

At the Expense of Teaching Them to Write?

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Just as various remedial reading programs, particularly those funded under Title I, begin to demonstrate a significant positive impact in terms of standardized test scores as well as observable classroom performance, more and more attention focuses on written communication skills which continue to fall below acceptable standards for large numbers of elementary and secondary students.

"Are we teaching students to read at the expense of teaching them to write?" As in the long-debated, never-resolved argument which pits the "phonics first" and "look say" advocates against one another, we never seem able to arrange our variables in the proper perspective.

The integration of <u>all</u> the language arts has long been an optimal curriculum goal. Teach reading and <u>not</u> writing? Focus on listening and touch only incidentally on speaking? Nonsense, yes, but one need only glance at uncorrected writing samples of students in remedial reading programs to conclude that indeed these questions are <u>not</u> nonsensical.

> I liked the back smith becus I liked the way
> Black smith shapped the hors shoe. I also liked the
> sping and weveing to. I liked the big lom.

This uncorrected writing sample is that of a sixth grader whose standardized reading test scores improved dramatically over five years in a remedial reading program. This student, in fact, scored <u>above</u> grade level at the time this writing sample was obtained and she no longer qualified for supplementary reading instruction. Had this student been taught to read at the expense of being taught to write?

A year long experimental "change of focus" in a Title I remedial program was initiated in an effort to ameliorate the frequently observed disparity between reading performance level and writing skill level.

A careful look at the fall standardized test scores of a group of upper elementary students from the Title I program clearly indicated that the goal of "grade level" performances had been met for most of them. Provision had been made to continue supplementary service, for sustaining progress, to a small percentage of these students. The question, then, was to determine which students, in addition to those few whose test scores clearly qualified them for continued support service, would best be served by "sustained progress" placement. Additionally, the question had to be considered of how best to "service" youngsters now reading on or near grade level. More of the same, i.e., daily focus on identified reading skill deficits in the resource room?

The decision was made to select for "sustained progress" those students demonstrating the widest disparity between reading skill level and writing skill level. Resource room instruction would focus, not on reading skill deficits, but on writing skill deficits. Students continuing to score "below grade level" continued of course to receive support service, but their remedial program would reflect the same change of focus. Reading instruction was not to be eliminated; rather, it would become a secondary objective. "Time on task" during each resource room session would be devoted primarily to writing instruction and practice. The remaining time would be utilized for traditional practice and reinforcement of reading skills.

An informal teacher survey revealed similar "concerns" about student writing: poor proofreading skills, careless spelling reflecting little attempt to approximate phonemic values, failure to construct complete sentences, repeated failure to note the "common conventions" such as correct five-part letter form, end punctuation, initial capitalization,

indenting, use of the comma in dates, use of periods in abbreviations, and finally, use of apostrophes.

A structured daily strategy was developed based on these expressed concerns. Because the teachers had expressed dismay that many students seemed unable to write a readable simple letter or short note, it was decided that daily writing practice would require the use of the five-part letter form. To stimulate interest among students, the "private diary" format was selected; each day students were asked to formulate a personal "letter" in their log book "diaries" to be shared only with the remedial teacher.

Most teachers reported that they were frustrated with the apparent inability of students to answer questions on written assignments and/or on tests in complete sentence form. It seemed critical, then, that students be taught a useful strategy for doing this. A "magic six step" formula was established to be used each time the students were confronted with a question to be answered in written sentence form.

From the start of the school year, when students reported for work in the resource room on Monday, they found a log book sheet listing one question for each day of the week. The "magic six step formula" was to be applied for the day's question, using the assignment sheet as a "sloppy copy" before transfer to the log book/diary.

Students might find the question "What is your favorite cafeteria lunch?" on their log book assignment sheet. Using this sheet for their "sloppy copy" and applying the "magic six step formula" would result in the following evolution of a literate topic sentence:

Magic Step One: READ THE QUESTION!

What is your favorite cafeteria lunch?

Magic Step Two: CROSS OUT THE QUESTION WORD AND POSSIBLY THE NEXT ONE OR TWO WORDS!

~~What is~~ your favorite cafeteria lunch?

Magic Step Three: FIND A GOOD "STARTING WORD," CIRCLE IT AND CAPITALIZE IT!

~~What is~~ (Your) favorite cafeteria lunch?

Magic Step Four: UNDERLINE SOME OF THE NEXT WORDS YOU MIGHT BE ABLE TO USE IN YOUR ANSWER!

~~What is~~ (Your) favorite cafeteria lunch?

Magic Step Five: CHANGE WORDS LIKE YOU OR YOUR TO I OR MY AND OTHER WORDS THAT DON'T SOUND RIGHT FOR AN ANSWER! ADD WORDS YOU NEED SO YOUR ANSWER MAKES SENSE!

~~What is~~ (My) favorite cafeteria lunch is . . .

Magic Step Six: WRITE YOUR ANSWER ON GOOD PAPER IF IT SOUNDS OK!

Log book questions were initially constructed very carefully in order that the "magic six steps" could be followed easily, with little need for word "rearrangement" or complex word or phrase additions. Questions focused on events or ideas closely tied to personal interests (hobbies, school routines, TV shows, etc.) so as to make daily writing practice as non-threatening as possible.

Day after day during the early weeks of fall, students "overlearned" the application of the "magic six steps," gradually finding it easier and easier to transform the day's question into a clear, concise, acceptable topic sentence to be transferred to their diary/log books in the form of a short personal note to the resource room teacher.

Establishing a "no-fail" routine for keeping "reluctant writers" on task of course involved more than just providing them with a strategy for getting started. The "magic six-step formula" virtually eliminated that all-too-familiar pattern of moans and groans associated with traditional composition lessons (from "I don't know what to write" to "I ain't got nothin' to say."). The formula provided a structure for getting a good topic sentence "under construction." In order to prevent a temporary (or permanent!) writer's "shutdown," additional "no-fail" strategies had to be established.

Teachers of reluctant writers are often able to get students to put ideas down on paper but then wonder if it's all been worth the effort when the product looks like this:

> *"We got a new stund tercher she brut in a imkubtore*
> *and we have at lest 18 egg in it for are despal."*

How best to insure that the flow of language, once begun via the magic six steps, would continue and result in something closely resembling literacy?

Because students were able to literally copy a great many "starting words" from the assignment, part of the frustrating task of "encoding from scratch" was alleviated. In the sample question, for example, the student is able without difficulty to get this much of the topic sentence on paper:

> *My favorite cafeteria lunch is ..."*

The encoding struggle is thus limited to *baked chicken* or *spaghetti with meat balls.*

From the start, specific standards for encoding were established and enforced. "Bad misspellings" (such as *atil* (for *until*) *sigat* (for *secret*) *lifsack* (for *livestock*) were absolutely unacceptable, while "good misspellings"

(such as *divelup, delishus, firnishure, fantastick*) were not only accepted but positively rewarded in order to instill a sense of pride in becoming, not good spellers (an unrealistic goal for these students) but better spellers.

One remedial session per week was set aside strictly for encoding practice, each week focusing on one "pretty dependable" phonemic element (such as *-tion, -ment, -ful, -ly, -ous, -le, pre-, -ar, -ill*, etc.).

Students attempted "good spellings" (not necessarily perfect) on small slates, competing against each other for the points awarded for "closest approximations." Each session ended with review of previously taught "pretty dependable" phonemic elements, and once covered on "encoding day," that element became a required standard in the daily writing assignments. Additionally, students were always held responsible for encoding the five short and long vowel sounds as they heard them, using a set of "vowel keys" they were required to keep with them anytime they were writing. The only other "standard" they had to meet was that of accounting for the correct number of syllables for each word they tried to encode. As the year progressed, students were amazed to find out what long words they could "almost correctly" encode. Their "approximations" appeared to improve as the pressure eased from trying (or not trying!) to spell "perfectly."

Once students were constructing clear, concise literate topic sentences, the daily writing requirement was increased to topic sentence plus one "development" sentence. Students were encouraged to use some of the words from their topic sentence for this development sentence, again alleviating much of the "encoding from scratch" pain. Any additional words needed to formulate the development sentence were of course required to

meet the "good (not necessarily perfect) spelling" standards by now firmly established.

By mid-year it was an easy transition to three sentence fully-developed (almost) paragraphs. More and more topic "questions" focused on content-related concepts instead of the more student-oriented questions. The ease with which students were able to construct good, clear topic sentences seemed to have unleashed a powerful flow of language. A few students began to ask if they could write more than three sentences about their science project or a character in the current instructional book or about what they had learned from a recent filmstrip. Any teacher who has struggled to get upper intermediate or middle school students to write anything will readily identify with the tremendous feeling of success generated by such questions. "Can we write more today?" Yes, they can write more today; and just wait until tomorrow!

And suddenly, it was tomorrow; in this case, spring. The daily log books were becoming treasured volumes of quality writing. This, from one of the poorest writers the previous fall:

> *I chose to write a report on frogs. I chose to write on them because I only know one thing about them. When they are scared they let out an asid for protecktion. I would like to know more about them.*

Could we now move students into real "compositions"? Would the suggestion that they could create multi-paragraph writings be overwhelming and perhaps counter-productive to our carefully devised "ease of writing" strategy?

We decided to give it a try and began by constructing a series of carefully "controlled" pairs of questions emphasizing comparison or contrast. Each question was to be transformed, via the magic six step formula, into

a topic sentence. Each topic sentence was then of course to be followed by two or three "development" sentences. Students might, for example, find this pair of questions on their Tuesday log assignment sheet:

For paragraph one: *Why did you choose to write about _____ for your science report?*

For paragraph two: *What are some of the things you will need to find out about _____ for your science report?*

Students were amazed that they could now actually write long daily log book letters. Day after day log book entries reflected all the fascinating ideas the students were gleaning from their classroom study of springtime's natural phenomena. Double paragraphs describing winter animal "coats" and spring "coats"; winter versus spring feeding habits, and the pros and cons of the "thawing process" were a joy to read and surprisingly easy for most students to create.

An interesting sidelight of focusing on content area concepts was a noticeable improvement in "encoding from scratch." Words like *went*, *want*, *once*, and *how* of course continued to appear in their various all-too-familiar "guises" (*whent*, *wnat*, *wonse*, and *who*), but words like *embryo*, *blastodisc*, and *camouflage* were usually accurately encoded!

Students exhibited a great deal of pride as they realized that they could create quality compositions; they were increasingly willing to use an available resource (as long as it wasn't the giant dictionary!) to help them encode correctly all those new and exciting nature-related words.

Without our realizing what was happening, our focus on writing as *first priority* in the remedial reading programs had come full circle. Students had discovered that not only were the "six steps" almost magical key to getting started on a writing task, but that they themselves

could add "step seven"; going back to available information resources and creating compositions they could be proud of and that others could read.